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Forgetting the End of the World: William Gibson Discusses Memory, Twitter and His Latest Novel *Zero History*

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Forgetting the end of the world

William Gibson discusses memory, Twitter and his latest novel

By Gerry Canavan

William Gibson, the author whose early works—especially his 1984 debut, *Neuromancer*—epitomized cyberpunk literature, is a writer who has seen his visions become unremarkable reality. That doesn't mean he's run out of things to do: He got a lot of attention for an Aug. 31 [New York Times op-ed](#) imagining Google as a kind of artificially intelligent superorganism that watches us with our own eyes. And he's just published his 10th novel, *Zero History*, which also completes his third trilogy, known as the "Blue Ant" series. ([Read our review.](#)) He'll be appearing at Reynolds Industries Theater in the Bryan Center on Duke University's West Campus on Sept. 21 at 7 p.m. We recently reached him by telephone.

Independent Weekly: You've become a very prolific user of Twitter with your account @greatdismal, and the site even makes an appearance as a plot element in *Zero History*. What is it about Twitter that appeals to you?

William Gibson: Nothing prior to Twitter in the way of social media had attracted me ... MySpace and Facebook just looked over-structured and Disneyland—much too much of a prepackaged experience. When a friend of mine joined Twitter, I thought "Oh, this sounds dreadful," and I thought I'd join it for a laugh, so I could make fun of it later. To my great surprise, I found it nicely understructured and very fast—and a year later, there I am.

What I'd miss most about Twitter [if it disappeared] is its astonishing power as an aggregator of novelty. It does in a few hours what one hundred professionally produced magazines could scarcely do in a month, skimming the world's weirdest, most wonderful things and depositing it on your desktop to be snacked on.

How did Twitter wind up in the new novel?

The conceit is that each novel is set in the year in which most of it was written, and I got Milgrim on Twitter a few weeks after getting on Twitter myself.

The "Blue Ant" trilogy has been heavily focused on the advertising trade, from the "cool-hunters" of *Pattern Recognition* to the "secret brands" in *Zero History*. Why have you become so interested in advertising in this moment?

It's a literalization of the way that we've become an apparently postindustrial civilization. If we've become a postindustrial civilization, what then is it that we actually do? We do branding

and marketing, that's what we do. I hope there's more to it than that, but just entertaining the possibility that that's all we do is a very interesting proposition from which to begin a novel.

What I find interesting about these novels is that you don't take the usual opinion that advertising is one-sidedly oppressive and terrible. In your books there really is something cool about cool-hunting; it's not just fluff.

I try for an anthropological approach: I go into the territory I'm looking at and try to see what it is. I try not to go in with too many preconceptions. Of course it's impossible in the end not to have preconceptions—on the first day of Anthro 101 they tell you that you're never going to actually understand your own culture—and so my attempts at objectivity vis-à-vis my own culture are sort of ridiculous. But I still try for it.

I try to rein in the natural human tendency to be didactic in fiction—because as soon as the actions of the characters begin to illustrate my own opinions, I've lost what feels to me to be my highest function as a novelist, which is to get the characters up and running to the point where I can't quite anticipate their actions and the course of the narrative starts to follow the trails of the strangely autonomous constructs who are living in my brain for 14 months while I'm doing this. I don't write novels to express ideas; I write novels about characters and the ideas come out of them.

The "zero history" in the title refers to a character who has lost nearly all of his memory of most of the last decade, with no financial or credit history for that time either.

My investigation of that was almost entirely at a poetic level, and it led me to suggest in my earlier books, in a way I think I still believe, that what we are is memory. We are that thing that memory is stored and preserved in, and which eventually falls apart, but also the memory itself. And if the memory goes away, we're no longer us.

As far as I know, we're one of the only animals that we're sure does this. It's one of the things that's made us such bad guests here; it's made us powerful enough to mess the place up. And it's led to the extinction of lots of other species that didn't happen to be as long in memory as we are. And at the top of the pyramid of technology on which we sit, there are a lot of devices that map to prosthetics for human memory and for human cultural memory—we've created systems that allow memory to survive the death of the individual. And in that regard we're absolutely unique, as far as we know. Whales may have very long memories of the things whales do, but they don't have cuneiform tablets or libraries or laptops.

This brings us back in a way to the 1980s nuclear apocalypse we were talking about earlier. Do you think contemporary ecological fears give young people a sense of what it was like to live inside that nuclear shadow?

It's a different thing. It's somewhat in the same ballpark, but it has a different character—in some way, I don't know, it seems wrong somehow to compare them. [With Mutually Assured Destruction] the horror was: Just stop doing this shit, put those things down, and forget about it ... Just stop it.

With anthropogenic climate change, it's more like: Shit, we didn't stop it, did we? And that's kind of all there is. We should be trying to stop this now, but it may have already gone too far... I don't have too much expectation of seeing how far it's going to go. I'm inclined to think that our great-great-great-grandchildren will regard us with a degree of contempt perhaps unknown towards one's ancestors in human history. And I think it's quite likely that we will deserve it. And that's new.